

THE HO CHI MINH CAMPAIGN:  
OPERATIONAL ART IN THE FALL OF SAIGON

A Monograph

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, in 1975, completed over a decade of constant turmoil within Vietnam. The unification of Vietnam under the North Vietnamese government marked a significant change in strategic posture and the spread of communism. Much of the literature concerning the Vietnam War focuses on the counter insurgent fight before the 1973 United States withdrawal. The purpose of this study is to show that the NVA employed operational art in their efforts to capture Saigon from 1973 to 1975. This study analyzes if the NVA used tempo, depth, and simultaneity in seizing Saigon. In exploring the tenets of operational art, this work strives to highlight how the NVA leveraged operational art, and provide an in-depth analysis of the drive south: the Ho Chi Minh Campaign.

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## ACRONYMS

CARL	Combined Arms Research Library
CGSC	U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
SAMS	School of Advanced Military Studies
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
U.S.	United States

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## INTRODUCTION

Our objective in South Vietnam has never been the annihilation of the enemy. It has been to bring recognition in Hanoi that it's objective taking over the South by force could not be allowed

—Lyndon B. Johnson, address to the nation, March 31, 1968

### Background of the Study

Vietnam was a total operational failure in the view of the American people and the armed forces. The perception is that the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975 was due to a growing insurgency. Historical documents, interviews and studies reveal that a conventional approach was used in seizing Saigon and the South Vietnamese Democratic government. In order to dispel myths for South Vietnam's demise, it is important to determine the cause of South Vietnam's capitulation and understand the strategic, operational and tactical environments that existed during this period. Upon analysis, does the evidence to support the use of operational art by the North Vietnamese Army in the fall of Saigon? A determination can be made on whether these plans coincided with the withdrawal of American forces in 1974.

The problem is clarifying if the NVA deliberately used operational art in seizing Saigon, or if the attack to penetrate into South Vietnam was an exploited opportunity. George Veith in *Black April* provides a detailed analysis of the conditions that existed to support the attack and the disposition of forces used to conduct the audacious offensive attack. There is evidence suggesting that the NVA used operational art. Considering the literature that provides extensive studies on Vietnam and associated actions within the conflict, the evidence to support if the North Vietnam used operational art in seizing Saigon and the government lacks in study and analysis.

The purpose of this study is to examine if the NVA used operational art during the 1975 offensive to seize South Vietnam. This study will attempt to explain how tempo, simultaneity, and depth were integral tenets in the NVA's use of operational art. Finally, the data collected will

be used to explain if operational art was an important part in seizing the capital of South Vietnam. Veith uses extensive interviews from both ARVN and NVA senior military officials in understanding how mission orders were received in the events leading up to April 1975.

The significance of the study is its importance to the historical community and the overall view of the end of Vietnam. More specifically, any military that values operational art will find merit in how North Vietnam viewed itself and the South Vietnam government in the strategic and operational environment. Americans tend to view Vietnam as a strategic failure and neglect to view how the conflict is observed from the North Vietnamese perspective. On the contrary, this study will highlight key points within the conflict, focusing on decisions from the NVA and North Vietnamese government on the strategic outlook of Saigon. The results of this study may be used as an example of how to use operational art in forcing strategic decisions and furthermore, utilizing conventional forces as a deciding factor in terms of imposing strategy. Although the conflict in Vietnam consisted of many battles and engagements that helped shape policy in the future, the seizure of Saigon was one of the most important due to its implications in the strategic environment for the next twenty years.

This study provided several definitions, offering the framework in which the task of undertaking if operational art influenced the seizure of Saigon. A distinction must be made in establishing the definition of operational art, tempo, simultaneity, and depth. In order to provide clarity to the study, other relevant terms will be used to help narrow the scope. Thus, this procedure is conducted in order to provide a common language relayed throughout the study.

Operational art is the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or a theater of operations through the design, organization and conduct of campaigns and

major operations.<sup>1</sup> With so many definitions dealing with operational art in the academic environment, it is pertinent to use an identified term within the Joint Forces community that is recognized for its use for this study. Tempo is the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy.<sup>2</sup> This study will explore how tempo determined the rate in which operational level units on the battlefield applied this tenet of operational art to outmaneuver ARVN units. Tempo will be used to frame how the NVA used tempo to drive the decision making process in the offensive action to seize Saigon. The concept of simultaneity, arising from the effort to form a system of principles and patterns of action, centered on the rationale of system paralysis, thus bringing the group of theoreticians to the nearest degree of accomplishing udar.<sup>3</sup> In a simplified definition, simultaneity is the combination of actions occurring within a time span with the intent of forcing the opposition to focus efforts everywhere. The concept of simultaneity will be used to evaluate if the NVA applied this tenet of operational art in their offensive to seize Saigon. The concept of depth seeks to overwhelm the enemy throughout the area of operation, creating competing and simultaneous demands on enemy commanders and resources, contributing to the enemy's speedy defeat.<sup>4</sup> This study will further explore if the NVA conventional forces utilized depth and if it was a major contribution to the fall of Saigon. Centers of Gravity are the characteristics, capabilities, or locations from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight. At the strategic level, centers of gravity might include a military force, an alliance, a set of critical capabilities or

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<sup>1</sup>Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, ed. Gabriel Gorodetsky (Newbury House: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 306.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Armed Forces, Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC, 2011), III-36.

<sup>3</sup>Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 215.

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Armed Forces, Joint Publication 5-0: *Joint Operation Planning*, III-36.

functions, or national strategy itself.<sup>5</sup> Understanding the strategic, operational, and tactical centers of gravity will assist in locating the decisive points and more importantly, the objectives of the NVA. The center of gravity analysis will be used as a way to link the strategic objectives of North Vietnam to the means and ends in seizing Saigon in April 1975.

The thesis presented in the study asserts that the NVA used operational art in seizing South Vietnam. There are four questions that of this study will constantly seek to answer:

1. Did the NVA employ tempo in their offensive?
2. Did the NVA employ simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon?
3. Did the NVA use depth in attacking South Vietnam, thus eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks?
4. Did the NVA's limited tactical actions assist in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon?

Scholars have conducted interviews and focused efforts on determining the cause of the fall of Saigon, and this study's objective is to evaluate the methods used by the North in deciding to seize Saigon at the precise time and location. This study has several limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Due to the location of the campaign, one cannot physically visit the location to conduct interviews or perform a terrain analysis. Declassified and open source documents will be used to ensure clarity and completeness of the study. Due to the sensitive nature of this event, incomplete operational details are available for an in-depth review. Time is a major limitation in this study due to the limited duration provided in order to determine a hypothesis. Various operational details may be omitted for added clarity and for concise and accurate analysis.

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<sup>5</sup>Dr. Joe Strange and Richard Iron, "*Understanding Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities*" (Suffolk, 2003), 1-15.

The scope of this study focuses primarily on the seizure of Saigon, centered on the events that occurred in between March 1973 and April of 1975. This study included an assumption that the NVA was deliberate in their decision to move south to seize the capital and unify Vietnam under one government. Another key assumption is that the conventional force used to penetrate was a well-trained and professional uniformed force, maintained in reserve to strike at the capital. This study attempts to highlight that the NVA used a form of operational art tied to ends, ways and means, to determine an appropriate time to utilize an armored force in April 1975.

This study will be organized into six sections. Section one includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose, significance of the work, definition of terms, theory of the proposed argument, limitations and delimitations of the study, and assumptions of the study. Section two presents a review of the literature, which includes how the theory is supported. This includes the authors that supported the hypothesis through similar writings. Section three describes the methodology used for this research study. The methodology used is a structural and focused analysis of the case study. Section four will discuss one case study used as base documents to build the argument and support the evidence of the research questions and hypothesis. Section five will produce the findings and analysis from the case study. Section six will finalize the study, providing a brief conclusion of the supporting evidence and hypothesis, assessing if the original theory/hypothesis is supported or unsupported.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Therefore, in campaigns where a systemic approach was applied, in both planning and management of armed forces, the nature of warfare was marked by sound operational logic and its conduct can be defined as operational art<sup>6</sup>

-Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Art*

### Introduction

This section introduces a discussion of the primary literature involved in the incorporation of operational art by the NVA in the fall of Saigon and the development of operational art as the linkage between strategy and tactics. Many studies focus on the fall of Saigon and highlight that the NVA seized the capital of South Vietnam to unify the country under one government. While this may be true, the use of operational art by the NVA has not had extensive exploration regarding the planning of the offensive. The Vietnam War was viewed by the American people as an un-popular conflict, led by corrupt ARVN officials. However, evidence exists suggesting that the defeat of South Vietnam was a deliberate and well-planned operation. The use of operational art in war has caused many debates among scholars and military thinkers, creating a misunderstanding of the purpose of operational art. To understand the purpose of operational art tenets employed by the NVA requires a discussion on the theory associated with the principle of operational art.

### Operational Art Theory

Some Soviet military theorists were advocates of using operational art, utilizing depth, simultaneity, and tempo to link tactical actions to strategic objectives. Operational art spans the theory and practice of planning and conducting campaigns, and major operations aimed at

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<sup>6</sup>Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, XIII.

accomplishing strategic and operational objectives in a given theater of operations.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet military understood that in order to achieve strategic objectives required linking actions in time and space. Operational art is, in a word, the way that is used to move military means in the direction of achieving strategic aims.<sup>8</sup>

Several theorists and scholars have written on operational art, providing an opportunity for increased intellectual study and discourse on the theory. Aleksandr Svechin, one of the world's leading operational art theorists, stated that, "operational art dictates the basic line of conduct of an operation, depending on the material, time, forces available, and on the nature of the operation itself."<sup>9</sup> This emphasizes that operational art leverages several factors in war, and balances the available means to ends. Svechin links operational art within the three levels of war, stating that just as tactics is an extension of operational art and operational art is an extension of strategy, strategy is an extension of politics.<sup>10</sup> Current U.S. Army doctrine describes operational art as "the cognitive approach by commanders, staff-supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment-to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways and means."<sup>11</sup> Operational art assists in framing the environment, enemy and terrain, to gain a marked advantage over an adversary. This provides options to a commander without decreasing tactical and operational effectiveness to

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<sup>7</sup>Martin Van Creveld, ed. John Andreas Olsen, *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>9</sup>Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. by Kent D. Lee, (Minneapolis: East View Publications, 1992), 69.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>11</sup>Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0: *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2011), 4-1.



execute actions on the battlefield. This study employs an in-depth analysis of how the tenets of operational art and center of gravity facilitate tactical actions that achieve strategic means.

Depth, as referred to in Soviet doctrine, emphasized the use of several large formations attacking an enemy formation and lines of communication, thus limiting the enemy's ability to counter attack. Shimon Naveh, a theorist on operational art, stated that, "Russian military culture, combining eastern and western ideas, developed an entirely different approach to the element of depth." Naveh further defines the usage of depth as "the physical framework for the operational interaction and the origin for both momentum and elasticity, establishing a harmony between the offensive and defensive."<sup>12</sup> Depth is a tenet in operational art that requires synchronization and the proper blend of tactical units to support strategic success. Soviet military thinking viewed depth as vital to operational art, enabled by the combination of simultaneity and tempo as components of operational art.

The concept of simultaneity, deriving from the effort to form a system of principles and patterns of action upon which a universal method for operational maneuver was founded, focused on enemy system paralysis.<sup>13</sup> As a tenet of operational art, simultaneity focuses on several decisive operations occurring in the same period, forcing the enemy to fight in several directions. For the purpose of this study, simultaneity is defined as way to disrupt or degrade an enemy's capability to counter attacks, synchronized throughout the battle space with planned attacks separated by time and space. Michael Krause in *Historical Perspectives of Operational Art* uses Soviet maneuver as a model, clarifying that "operational maneuver capabilities enabled full-scale army groups pressing continuous operations over hundreds of kilometers in sequenced,

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<sup>12</sup>Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 301-301.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 215.

simultaneous orchestrated campaigns using continuous operational maneuver.”<sup>14</sup> Synchronization plays a role in simultaneity, tying operational maneuvers with key decisions to strike at an enemy force, and linking these actions in time.

Tempo, according to current U.S. Army doctrine, “requires audacity and patience, with the goal of retaining the initiative and achieving the desired end state.”<sup>15</sup> Military thinkers fail to understand the balance of audacity and patience, misinterpreting the use of tempo with speed. This study uses the balancing of the factors in tempo to clarify how tempo was implemented by the NVA in the fall of Saigon. Robert Leonard relates tempo to frequency, asserting that “the number of significant military events per unit time, or how fast things occur. In addition, tempo requires the commander to either slow or quicken their tempo relative to the defenders actions, promoting surprise and keeping the enemy off-balance.”<sup>16</sup> When tempo combined with depth and simultaneity, is achieved together, results in the lowering of enemy morale, confusion and multiplies the efforts needed to achieve the end state. Furthermore, this study examines how the NVA used tempo in their campaign to decisively seize Saigon.

Current U.S. military doctrine describes center of gravity as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.”<sup>17</sup> Disagreements have raged for decades over the definition of a center of gravity at the operational level. This study will examine if the NVA used this type of cognition in evaluating the strategic, operational, and tactical centers of gravity in assessing South Vietnamese armed forces and government. Naveh

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<sup>14</sup>Michael D. Krause and Cody R. Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, CMH PUB 70-89-1, (Washington, DC; Center of Military History, 2007), 231.

<sup>15</sup>Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0: *Unified Land Operations*, (Washington, DC; Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2012), 4-7.

<sup>16</sup>Robert R. Leonard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publications, 1994), 69-72.

<sup>17</sup>U.S. Armed Forces, Joint Publication 5-0: *Joint Operation Planning*, 23.

expands identification of the CoG, specifying three parts: the identification of the exact points of strengths and weaknesses, the deliberate creation of operational vulnerabilities and the exploitation of such vulnerabilities through contemplating maneuvering strikes.<sup>18</sup>

The remainder of this work will focus on the three elements of operational art and centers of gravity. Operational art in planning is used where applicable in all operational and strategic levels of war to identify gaps in understanding the environment. Understanding of operational art in doctrine is important when operating in complex and ambiguous environments, providing the tactical and operational commander a clear and achievable end state.

Operational art, tempo, depth, simultaneity, and centers of gravity are not new concepts in war, and garners attention from leaders in the pursuit of strategic goals. Operational art provides the linkage between strategy and tactics, and if ignored, can result in catastrophic failure. If operational art, viewed from the enemy perspective, is stricken from review, lessons will be lost and the same mistakes in the operational environment will occur in future conflicts. As part of strategy, operational art provides guidance and a way to enable future operations in an operational environment.

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<sup>18</sup>Naveh, *In Pursuit Military Excellence*, 19.

## METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this work is to test the hypothesis that NVA forces used operational art. Specifically depth, simultaneity, and tempo, in seizing Saigon and forcing the capitulation of the South Vietnamese government. This section outlines the methodology employed to test this hypothesis, using qualitative analysis. Subjective evaluation is used to measure the effectiveness of the tenets, using a yes or no answer and a center of gravity analysis as a source of the hypothesis. This section is comprised of four subsections consisting of the selection of the case study, proposed overview of the questions, data collection, analysis and a summary.

The case study reviewed during this analysis focuses on the perspective on the campaign to seize South Vietnam, and the events prior to and after April 1975. This case study was selected due to the content, providing an in-depth perspective on the fall of Saigon. For the selected case study, *Black April* by George Veith offers insights into the operational outlook of the NVA leadership. Likewise, the author frames the problems that existed in South Vietnam prior to April 1975, as conditions were set for a major shift in regional power. To sum up, the case study will present evidence that is used to test the hypothesis that operational art shaped the battlefield, thus providing a marked advantage to the NVA forces.

This subsection provides the instrumentation of how this monograph evaluates the application of depth, simultaneity, and tempo used by the NVA in the selected case study. To allow for a base of knowledge to be established, this paper opens the case study with a brief overview of the conditions present prior to April 1975. This will enable understanding of the settings that existed within the NVA, ARVN and strategic political environment. This case study will be reviewed, and assessed to confirm or deny the use of depth, simultaneity, and tempo in seizing Saigon, and consider the implications of the use of these elements and if the use of operational art tenets resulted in strategic success.

This study will use a structured focused approach in determining how the data will be presented for analysis and synthesis, similar to the process applied by George and Bennett. In order to accurately depict if these operational tenets were used, this evaluation will confirm or deny their inclusion and attempt to identify the associated effects on the campaign's outcome. Finally, the case will be assessed if the employment of the three operational tenets and center of gravity analysis were used by the NVA in the campaign to seize Saigon.

The purpose of this subsection is to review the questions that support the theory that the NVA used operational art in seizing Saigon. The supporting questions support the theory in conceptualizing how the NVA used depth, simultaneity, and tempo to penetrate a weak ARVN defensive belt and force the capitulation of South Vietnam.

The first question proposed is did the NVA employed tempo in their offensive? This question will explore if the NVA commanders were able to leverage speed as major factor in defeating ARVN units tasked with protecting the capital of Vietnam. The supporting evidence in the case study alludes to NVA leaders deliberately constructing decisions to use the speed and lethality of an armored corps to destroy the advanced guard of the ARVN units protecting Saigon. This question will assist in understanding how tempo, as a tenet of operational art, was instrumental in the movement of armored units from northern to southern Vietnam.

The second question proposed is did the NVA employed simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon? The use of combined arms units (artillery, armor, infantry and engineer) was a contributing factor in NVA's plan to maneuver into South Vietnam. To prevent single units' interdiction in their movement south, the simultaneous movement of units at the same time along several avenues of approach, attacking various objectives, required synchronization in time and space. This question will focus on if NVA commanders were able to conduct movements along several axis of approach to achieve a common goal. In addition, the command and control of NVA armored forces will be examined to determine how simultaneity

was leveraged to force the ARVN to fight in several directions, thus allowing the NVA to exploit the ARVN defensive belt.

The third question proposed is did the NVA employed depth in attacking South Vietnam, eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks? This study will examine if the NVA achieved depth to counter the ARVN's ability to counter attack its flanks. In order to maneuver an armored corps into a position of relative advantage in constrained terrain required the use of depth to conduct a penetration, simultaneously protecting its flanks. The concept of depth is important to determine how the NVA's lines of operation were protected. This question will focus on the level of depth the NVA was able to achieve in relation the forces allocated, the terrain that limited movement of their tactical formations, and the ARVN forces faced during their campaign.

The final question proposed is did the NVA's limited tactical actions assisted in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon? The NVA used tactical and operational actions to force the ARVN and South Vietnamese government to focus on their armored columns, exposing their strategic center of gravity, the capital of Saigon. This question seeks to answer whether the NVA utilized deliberate planning in choosing to attack the capital. Additionally, this question seeks to answer if the NVA tied operational actions to strategic and political end states of unifying Vietnam under one government. This question will reveal if the NVA visualized how these actions were able to alter the strategic environment, allowing Communism to force the capitulation of a Democratic government.

Doctrine, battle summaries, interviews, professional military journals and historical texts provide the data required for analysis of this study. Historical texts and battle summaries will inform on the political and strategic environment, as well as the planning and execution of the campaign. Interviews will provide in-depth firsthand accounts of the events before, during and

after April 1975. Doctrine and military journals will provide the foundation for which concepts and aspects are based on and a reference for common terms and graphics.

This section outlined the framework of this study's methodology, supporting the study's theory. This methodological approach pursues two efforts that support the understanding of the overall study. The first effort identifies the conditions present prior to the campaign that allowed the use of depth, simultaneity, and tempo to allow the NVA to seize Saigon. The second effort is to assess the case study to determine if the fall of Saigon was a deliberate attempt by the NVA to use operational art in employing operational tenets, in planning and execution, achieving the operational and strategic end states.

## CASE STUDY

“Speed, ever greater speed. Daring, ever greater daring. Exploit every hour, every minute. Rush to the battlefield to liberate the South. Resolve to fight to secure total victory.”

-General Giap’s cable to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps troops, 7 April 1975, *Black April*

This study used George and Bennett’s structured, focused comparison method to examine depth, tempo, simultaneity and centers of gravity in one campaign of the Vietnam War.<sup>19</sup> This method’s structure is created so that the analysis of the case study is conducted through a set of guiding questions. The method employs focus to analyze one campaign and how the tenets of operational art were utilized within the campaign to support NVA operational objectives. This section is broken up into four parts: the introduction, overview of the case study to establish the narrative and period, and questions answered using empirical data, and the summary.

### Overview of Case Study

The period in which this case study occurs is from March 1973 to April 1975 and referred to as the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. This period will be further broken down into three distinct phases. Phase I begins in March 1973 and ends in December 1974, Phase II begins in December 1974 and ends in February 1975, and Phase III begins in March and ends in April 1975. The purpose of these phases is to accurately frame how the NVA leadership envisioned whether conditions were set for an attack to seize Saigon and the unification of South Vietnam under one government. This section evaluates the reasons that facilitated NVA success by focusing on the

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<sup>19</sup>Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. (Cambridge: The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2005), 22.



following factors: lack of U.S. airpower and technological superiority, the reduction of U.S. aid, and oversights by the ARVN leadership in preparing for an attack.<sup>20</sup>

#### Phase I: March 1973-Dec 1974

On 29 March 1973, the last American troops departed southern Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> This single event set into motion the events that essentially sealed the fate of South Vietnam in April of 1975. Following the withdrawal of American troops in 1973, the United States leadership vowed to provide South Vietnam with resources and assets to deter North Vietnamese aggression. Consequently, the War Powers Resolutions, passed on 7 November 1973, prohibited President Nixon from declaring war without congressional consent.<sup>22</sup> The NVA leadership viewed these political restrictions as an opportunity to consolidate combat power, reassess operational and tactical objectives, and test the ARVN's ability to defend itself without U.S. intervention.

Assessment of NVA objectives requires some historical context in order to understand how the North Vietnam Politburo, the governing body of North Vietnam, was able to set conditions to begin preparations for an attack into South Vietnam. In 1972, the Nguyen Hue offensive placed the NVA into a position to pose a legitimate threat to Southern Vietnam's sovereignty. The North Vietnam Politburo learned a valuable lesson from the limited offensive. They underestimated the effectiveness of U.S. airpower, resulting in an under developed and strategically flawed plan.<sup>23</sup> These important lessons were carried forward, shaping the eventual methodical decisions of the Politburo to posture itself, politically and militarily, to avoid these same mistakes in the future.

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<sup>20</sup>George J. Veith, *Black April*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 48.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>23</sup>James H. Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War*, (Fort Leavenworth: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 152-153.

On 27 March 1973, the Politburo met to discuss a long-term plan to “conquer South Vietnam within a two year period.”<sup>24</sup> This meeting’s agenda included a strategic and operational plan to liberate South Vietnam. The plan’s aims included slowly degrading the ARVN’s ability to defend Saigon and provided guidance to the NVA to enable the building of forces and supplies necessary for combat operations, nesting tactical means to strategic ends. In addition, expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolating Saigon diplomatically were viewed as secondary objectives in this phase, allowing the North Vietnamese government to create an atmosphere of uncertainty among the South Vietnamese people. In order to fracture the defensive belt surrounding Saigon, the NVA needed two requirements: first, the level of U.S. intervention in efforts to block maneuvers south and that if the ARVN possessed the specific capabilities to counter attack.

#### Phase II: Dec 1974-Feb 1975

This phase is broken up into two sub-phases: the political-strategic phase and the military buildup/limited attack phase. North Vietnam created deception within the political environment, while simultaneously building combat power and positioning itself militarily for limited attacks on the ARVN positions. The NVA deliberately launched probing attacks against the Phuoc Long Province with the intentions of testing ARVN capabilities and U.S. response.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the Politburo assessed the threat to the NVA as minimal and continued to shape the environment by building combat power and positioning its forces for Phase III.

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<sup>24</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 120.

<sup>25</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, 4.

## Political-Strategic Phase

Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, attempted to alter the opinions of the U.S. Congress and American public. Hanoi provided evidence that North Vietnam was attempting to improve itself economically, therefore eliminating the need for foreign aid to South Vietnam. Hence, the Communists secretly used this narrative as a cover for the buildup of combat power, concealing the movement of units south to begin limited attacks and infiltrations against ARVN positions.<sup>26</sup> Politburo member Nguyen Duy Trinh denied President Thieu's accusations that the NVA was preparing to attack in January 1974, during the Paris Peace accords. These accusations were further disproved upon the declaration of resolution of 22<sup>nd</sup> Plenum, dictating the directions and missions for North Vietnam's efforts of reconstruction and development of their economy from 1974-75.<sup>27</sup> This resolution provided the NVA time and space militarily to begin shaping operations in preparation for future attacks into South Vietnam, eventually culminating in an armored strike to seize Saigon. On 18 December 1974, the Politburo convened, solidifying military options based on the political and diplomatic changes, thus signaling the beginning of major hostilities focused on shaping operations in anticipation of the main assault into Saigon.<sup>28</sup>

The final indirect political strike occurred in June 1973, the United States signed the Cambodia/Laos Bill.<sup>29</sup> The Bill prohibited direct or indirect action in Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam, removing all funds for air or ground assets in support of South Vietnam after 15 August 1973. Upon receiving information of the bill, the North Vietnamese government shifted their efforts from *dau tranh* (political struggle) to military action.<sup>30</sup> The signing of the bill by the

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<sup>26</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 170.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 304.

<sup>29</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, 195.

<sup>30</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 196.

President Nixon was the final stroke required by the NVA to proceed with their conceived plans, sealing the fate of South Vietnam and its military.

### Military Phase

With political and diplomatic issues addressed, the NVA began limited engagements aimed at degrading the ARVN, and seizing key terrain necessary for an attack into the heart of South Vietnam. The important aspect present during this period resided in the NVA's ability to project combat power in comparison to the ARVN who relied on U.S. airpower and resources to tip the scales in their favor. The NVA increased its reserves consisting of armor, artillery and anti-aircraft capabilities, enabling the NVA forces to begin operations aimed at critical points and key terrain required for an eventual attack south. The key to capturing Saigon quickly resided with the capture of the Central Highlands, an intermediate objective of the NVA's operational approach.<sup>31</sup>

Based on guidance from the Politburo, Colonel General Tran Van Tra launched a series of strategic raids focused on limited objectives, with the intent of preventing the ARVN in strengthening Saigon's defenses and expanding zones by isolating ARVN outposts. Hanoi's objective was to isolate Saigon, cut off defense forces and defeat them in detail.<sup>32</sup> This kept the ARVN on the defensive while destroying them piecemeal, constricting their ability to reconstitute combat losses. These two initiatives created chaos through political unrest within the South Vietnamese population and degraded the ARVN's morale.<sup>33</sup> In May of 1974, the NVA launched its first major attack focused at the Tam KY, the provincial capital of Quang Tin. The purpose of

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<sup>31</sup>Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, (New York: Praeger., INC, 1989), 126.

<sup>32</sup>Llyod J. Matthews, Dale E. Brown and General Bruce Palmer, Jr., *Assessing the Vietnam War: A collection from the Journal of the U.S. Army War College*, (McLean: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1987), 111.

<sup>33</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 202.

these raids and attacks were not to achieve decisive victory, but rather to weaken and demoralize the ARVN's meager attempts to defend everything while defending nothing.

Upon conclusion of these limited attacks, NVA leadership assessed its forces and the effects these attacks on the strategic and political environment. First, through deliberate preparation and combat experience, the NVA assessed that its main forces were superior to the ARVN in virtually every aspect of war fighting. Second, the lack of U.S. airpower and political support contributed to the North Vietnamese Politburo's views that conditions were set for a final offensive into South Vietnam. Key to setting these conditions was the severing of vital supply lines into Saigon, limiting Saigon's ability to receive aid or resources. The second key was extending the NVA's ability to reinforce itself by capturing Route Fourteen that connected the Cambodian border to the Quang Duc province. General Tra described these areas as springboard positions from which to attack Saigon in the spring of 1975.<sup>34</sup>

### Phase III: March 1975-April 1975

With armored units and stockpiles of supplies positioned, the NVA leadership was positioned to begin major combat operations aimed at successfully seizing Saigon. Upon receiving specific instructions to attack, General Tra's forces attacked into the passive defensive belts surrounding Saigon, utilizing depth, tempo and simultaneity that complemented the overall operational end state. Tactically, the NVA maneuvered against the ARVN in inferior motorized and mechanized vehicles, but synchronized their actions without sacrificing firepower and maneuverability. Furthermore, the lack of U.S. airpower enabled the NVA to focus on ground operations, restricting the ARVN's ability to conduct a three-dimensional fight, ultimately leading to the seizure of Saigon.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 258.

The purpose of this section is to answer the questions presented in the methodology. This section will be broken down into three parts consisting of the restated questions, each question explained, and a summary. Each question will be further broken up into three parts. First, restating of the question provides the framework of the study. Second, the answer to the question based on a subjective view of the evidence presented will assist the reader in understanding the intent of the question. Third, empirical evidence is used from the case study to provide analysis to the answers to support or unsupport the four questions.

The first question proposed is if the NVA employed tempo in their offensive to seize Saigon. The answer is yes based on the evidence presented. From experience and after action reviews from the failed 1968 and 1972 offensives, the NVA determined that in order to meet their operational objectives required a combination of increased intensity, rate, and rhythm of attacks against the ARVN across the all fronts. The NVA's success pivoted off their ability to outpace the ARVN's ability to counter penetrations and envelopments and match the frequency at which these attacks took place.<sup>35</sup>

The frequency at which attacks against ARVN units occurred was tested in December of 1974. General Giap intended the strategic raids against ARVN units as a way to measure effectiveness, in time and space, to gauge how effective the ARVN could counter attack.<sup>36</sup> Giap's assessment prior to the NVA's movement south in December 1974 linked to the frequency of NVA units attacks, assessing that ARVN units were unable to determine the disposition and composition of NVA units. The NVA utilized the expanded Ho Chi Minh trail to replenish

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<sup>35</sup>Stephen Hosmer, Konrad Kelley and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, (New York; Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1980), 19. From the actual invasion of Southern Vietnam and seizure of Saigon only took twenty days (10 March-29 March 1975), a direct correlation to the swift movement of the NVA.

<sup>36</sup>Alan Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, INC., 1977), 324.

fatigued units, allowing them to maintain increased combat effectiveness in a shorter period.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the ARVN were unsuccessful at replacing combat power at the proper location and time to counter NVA efforts. An additional factor linked to NVA success was the ARVN's lack of a mobile reserve.<sup>38</sup> During phase II, the NVA steadily increased their tempo by concurrently attacking at increased frequencies, forcing the ARVN out of their static battle rhythm and deteriorating their ability to maintain initiative and defend in depth.<sup>39</sup>

The lack of synchronization, an aborted aspect required in applying tempo, was a lesson learned from the 1968 and 1972 offensives. The NVA military leadership distributed clear orders prior to the attack, synchronizing efforts during Phase II of their limited attacks in 1974. Therefore, upon reaching the seventeenth parallel, tempo increased through the frequency and duration of their attacks, synchronized across all commands. On 3 April 1975, Dung and his forward command moved to Cambodia, entrusting General Tra's B-2 front to synchronize efforts across all units, further emphasizing command and control, increasing tempo of the NVA significantly.<sup>40</sup> In *Abandoning Vietnam*, Willbanks asserts that the ARVN could not effectively suppress attacks by the NVA, allowing the NVA to "achieve numerical superiority and terms of

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<sup>37</sup>Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War*, 256.

<sup>38</sup>Hosmer, Kelley and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, 12.

<sup>39</sup>General Cao Van Vein, *The Final Collapse*, (Washington, DC; Center of Military History, 1983), 145. By replacing units quicker than the ARVN, the NVA maintained a constant frequency of operations without sacrificing time to replace attrited units. On 25 March 1975, the Politburo issued guidance to General Dung to seize the opportunity to liberate Saigon prior to the rainy season. Dung, intent on utilizing speed to achieve the operational and strategic objective, wanted a few more days to "attack, annihilate, and disintegrate the remaining ARVN on the coast." The Politburo's guidance to the NVA leadership emphasized the use of tempo, a combination of intensity and planned intervals linked to the operational objective, to capture Saigon prior to the rainy season.

<sup>40</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 811.

battle at the time and place of their choosing.”<sup>41</sup> In this aspect, the NVA utilized tempo to dictate the rapidity and decisiveness of their engagements with the ARVN.

The use of armor contributed to the tempo and rate of recurrence at which the NVA seized objectives. The ARVN had been conditioned for years to oppose infantry-centric attacks, but were completely unprepared to counter a coordinated armored attack.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the ARVN relied primarily on augmented U.S. firepower, never focusing on fighting with maneuver and fire.<sup>43</sup> The reliance on firepower, rather than maneuver, yielding a ARVN force crippled by years of fighting small engagements, enabled by superior U.S. technology and firepower. The speed at which NVA armored formations seized objectives and defeated ARVN units assisted in the momentum of tempo on the battlefield, penetrating soft defenses and seizing objectives without interdiction from ARVN infantry. The lack of U.S. firepower, coupled with the ARVN’s unfamiliarity in countering the intervals and frequency of attacking armored formations, enabled the NVA to apply the use of tempo.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the speed and timing at which the NVA maneuvered to Saigon was dictated on their terms, reinforcing their ability to control the operational environment through tactical means.

On 13 April 1975, a combined arms team from the 203<sup>rd</sup> Tank Brigade and 101<sup>st</sup> Regiment conducted the largest strike by the NVA. These orders emphasized the lethal combination of firepower and speed, designed to penetrate the enemy’s defenses and reach his rear area. If the spearhead failed, then a second would be conducted without hesitation.<sup>45</sup> Psychologically, the NVA instilled speed and power into the mindset of its leaders and soldiers,

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<sup>41</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War*, 200.

<sup>42</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 926.

<sup>43</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War*, 286.

<sup>44</sup>Joes, *The War for South Vietnam*, 127.

<sup>45</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 918-919.



imparting the theme of not halting until the enemy's rear area was reached and all enemy forces were defeated or destroyed. Tempo, in essence, was instilled physically using mechanized forces with infantry, and psychologically through the emphasis on the direct goal of capturing Saigon.

The NVA applied tempo throughout their campaign during phases two and three in several ways. From December 1974 to April 1975, the NVA employed five corps sized elements against seven ARVN divisions in rhythm and an increased frequency. The sustained ferocious contact in which the attacks occurred exhausted ARVN elements, forced the ARVN to prematurely withdraw elements, and created an operational buffer to assess the timing of U.S. intervention. Similarly, the application of tempo by the NVA created confusion within the ARVN by concentrating combat power, thus creating vulnerabilities at levels the ARVN were inexperienced at dealing with.<sup>46</sup>

The second question proposed is if the NVA employed simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon. The answer to this question is yes based on the evidence presented in the case study. The NVA divided Vietnam into four military fronts, B-1 through B-4. Geographically, the North, Central Highlands and South divided Vietnam into sectors. The key for seizing Saigon relied on two objectives. First, cutting Highway One was critical because this created an avenue of approach directly into Xuan LOC and Hue, thus trapping ARVN units from withdrawing or receiving reinforcements. Second, seizing the Central Highlands created a change in balance, a characteristic that the NVA leadership visualized would force the ARVN into a siege position in Saigon, and allow the NVA freedom to maneuver south at their choosing.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Leonard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, 72-73.

<sup>47</sup>Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam*, 29.

The LOC Program, an extensive road improvement program by the Department of the Navy, was conducted from late 1969 to May 1972. This road network converted trails and paths to major highways, enabling the movement of economic goods and services throughout the Southern Vietnam Theater. Subsequently, these road networks followed the same axis of advance of NVA units following the strategic raids in 1974, serving as high-speed avenues of approach into Southern Vietnam. By utilizing improved highways, the NVA were handed a direct route into Saigon by the widening and paving of previous severely restricted terrain. In this case, simultaneity aided the NVA by providing multiple axis of advances for their armored forces, presenting multiple options for attacks towards Saigon.<sup>48</sup>

The coordination of attacks in the B-4 theatre (South), coupled with the simultaneous attacks in the North and Central highlands in March 1975, forced the ARVN to fight numerous armored corps in three directions at one time.<sup>49</sup> Simultaneity, combined with tempo, increased the number of NVA units attacking and the frequency of attacks resulted in ARVN units overwhelmed at the volume and durations of these attacks. In *Vietnam: History of the B-2 Theatre*, General Tra describes that the NVA's aim was to create chaos on several different fronts, on an unpredictable frequency, and with superiority in numbers across time and space.<sup>50</sup> This operational viewpoint provided the NVA the time and window to utilize simultaneity across

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<sup>48</sup>Richard Tregaskis, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases: The History of Construction*, (Columbia: Department of the Navy, 1975), 419. In this book, figure twenty six displays the Loc improvement program. 3,198 kilometers of road were improved by 1972. Unintentionally, the Navy assisted the NVA advances in the spring of 1975 by opening up trails in terrain that were unavailable to the NVA during the 1968 offensive. Unknown to U.S. advisers and strategic planners, North Vietnam improved the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This provided a total of four major maneuver corridors to maneuver forces into Southern Vietnam.

<sup>49</sup>General Tan Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre, Volume 5: Concluding the Thirty Years War*, Southeast Asia Report, (Springfield, Virginia: Combat Studies Institute, 1983), 149.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

the entire Vietnam Theater at their choosing, deceiving the ARVN about where and when the next attack would originate.

During Phase I, the NVA general staff calculatingly planned to utilize simultaneity by means of superiority in numbers and by attacking the same positions consecutively during the limited attacks and raids. The Politburo recognized that in order to prevent political/military intervention required that the military attack several critical points simultaneously to quickly seize the capital of South Vietnam.<sup>51</sup>

North Vietnam, strategically and operationally, used simultaneity to leverage assets and resources available by extensive war gaming and task organizing elements with multiple capabilities able to conduct a myriad of tasks with minor constraints. An example of the use of simultaneity is the cutting of routes and widening of dry and wet gaps to enable the movements of mechanized forces to objectives. In mid January 1975, General Dung cut Routes Nineteen and Twenty-one, the two main arteries connecting the Military Region II.<sup>52</sup> General Dung's forces seized the city of Ban Me Thout in March 1975, creating a direct path to Saigon and forcing the ARVN to depart a piece of key terrain required for control of the Central Highlands.<sup>53</sup>

The use of simultaneity in capturing Xuan Loc was key to deceiving the ARVN leadership of the operational intentions of the NVA. The city of Xuan Loc, sixty kilometers north of Saigon, controlled the two main paved highways of Route One and Route Twenty into

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<sup>51</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 215.

<sup>52</sup>LTC Stuart A. Herrington, *Peace with Honor? An American reports on Vietnam 1973-1975*. (New York: Presidio Press, 1983), 142. The reduction of key obstacles by sappers, such as bridges and crossing points, as well as excavation efforts to locate mines and widen paths, were paramount in the success of armored units moving rapidly into southern Vietnam.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 146.

Saigon.<sup>54</sup> Based on previous experiences in seizing key cities, the ARVN assessed that it would take one to two months before the NVA would mount such an audacious and risky attack. On the contrary, NVA forces quickly encircled the ARVN, seized Xuan Loc, creating conditions for control of the Central Highlands and control of Route One. The rapid seizure of Xuan Loc essentially shaped conditions for unopposed access south, demoralizing the ARVN's confidence, and creating a chaotic situation in South Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

The use of indirect fires contributed to the utilization of simultaneity by NVA forces. On 10-11 April 1975, Communist forces slowed their maneuver forces movement to a temporary halt and bombarded ARVN positions inside of the city of Xuan Loc. This artillery barrage combined with maneuver served two purposes. First, the artillery fire prevented the encircled ARVN from repositioning its forces. Second, it prevented resupply and evacuation of ARVN troops to rear areas.<sup>56</sup> In this aspect, the use of simultaneity by the NVA served several purposes while providing options for engaging the enemy, while concurrently maintaining the initiative. The NVA employed indirect fires constantly throughout their campaign south, focused on deceiving ARVN forces of maneuver elements' intent and movements, while concurrently providing a buffer for maneuver elements to move into positions of advantage.

On 27 April 1975, the NVA launched rocket preparatory attacks onto key targets within Saigon. Simultaneously, two corps and two divisions moved into attack positions outside of Saigon. This massive armored formation converged on the city from five separate directions,

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<sup>54</sup>George J. Veith and Merle L. Pribbenow, "*Fighting is an Art: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Defense of Xuan Loc, 9-12 April 1975*," (The Journal of Military History, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2004: 163-213), 165.

<sup>55</sup>Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1999), 378. There were instances that ARVN units fought well but received minimal or no operational directives. Lewis Sorely provides an example that the 18<sup>th</sup> Division held off three attacking NVA divisions for a month before being defeated and withdrawing.

<sup>56</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 981.

forcing the remaining ARVN units to abandon their positions, setting conditions for the South Vietnamese government's capitulation.<sup>57</sup> General Giap used simultaneity by placing his armored forces into a position for a final assault on the capital, employing a combination of indirect fires, reconnaissance and engineer units.

The NVA utilized simultaneity by using mass and surprise at multiple locations in the B-1 through B-4 fronts unopposed by the ARVN. The NVA employed twenty-two divisions organized into five army corps, attacking on five different axes of advance in the final movement to Saigon in March of 1975.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, the ARVN employed two divisions as a strategic reserve to counter the NVA threat. Once the NVA launched their final assault, the force ratio compared to ARVN forces was four to one, tipping the scales of victory towards North Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> This created a significant gap of where to reinforce defeated ARVN elements, thus exploiting a seam in the defensive belt surrounding Saigon. The number of NVA units attacking versus the ARVN units defending in key areas, such as Hue and Xuan Loc, caused the collapse of the defensive belt simply because the ARVN were unable to counter the force ratios of NVA units attacking in a timely effort.

The third question proposed is if the NVA employed depth in attacking South Vietnam, eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks. The answer is yes due to the evidence presented in the case study. The NVA's manner in which they conducted their deep penetrating attack against ARVN defenses and into their rear areas is reminiscent of the Soviet concept of deep operations. As a communist country heavily influenced by the Soviet Union during this period, it is apparent that depth played a huge part in how this operational tenet's

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<sup>57</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, 271.

<sup>58</sup>Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, INC.,1977), 335.

<sup>59</sup>Herrington, *Peace with Honor? An American Reports on Vietnam 1973-1975*, 126.

utilization by the NVA. Svechin and Schneider's concepts of warfare are prevalent in the use of depth by North Vietnam, in concept as well as in practice.

From April to December of 1974, the NVA leadership practiced extensively on conducting deep attacks, focused on surprising the ARVN, destroying headquarters elements and creating confusion.<sup>60</sup> Successful attacks during the winter months of 1974 reinforced the applicability of deep operations, and combined with tempo and simultaneity, forced the ARVN to fight in disjointed separate engagements. This design created gaps in the defensive line, allowing the NVA to penetrate their defenses undeterred, fighting engagements and battles within the ARVN's interior lines. This characteristic led to the extensive use of depth throughout the campaign by the NVA's combined armed teams' movement south.

The Politburo emphasized depth, instructing the NVA military leadership that "the attacks must be continuous and powerful, focused on striking Saigon from different directions simultaneously."<sup>61</sup> This provided the prescriptive guidance and intent, avoiding stalemates and preventing NVA units from being decisively engaged by enemy fires. The NVA employed deep operations during the Phase II period in the form of limited attacks. The NVA achieved deep operations by using all aspects of the combined arms team, preparing them for seizing the capital of South Vietnam. By interdicting ARVN lines of communication and supply routes while simultaneously moving forces deliberately to Saigon, the NVA was able to achieve a level of depth the ARVN was unable to contest. From February 1974 to June 1974, the NVA launched

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<sup>60</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 326.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 986.

four separate corps sized raids against the ARVN, allowing the NVA to test the responsiveness of the ARVN.<sup>62</sup>

NVA forces managed to capture the Bong and Sang Bridges, providing the 10<sup>th</sup> Division the opportunity to conduct deep penetrations in order to seize the Joint General Staff Headquarters.<sup>63</sup> These two bridges were critical avenues of approach into Saigon and served as the preliminary point where ARVN forces consolidated combat power, placing their ability to defend the city at risk. Conversely, this enabled the NVA to achieve depth without sacrificing its rear areas to attack. This tactical action positioned General Dung's forces on to the doorsteps of Saigon. Although this one engagement was the primary focus of the Politburo, the NVA fixed ARVN units, furthering their ability to conduct deep attacks continuously into Saigon without hindrance or opposition. This brought five armored NVA corps and seven divisions surrounding Saigon on five directions, supported by a division per to follow and support future attacks into the capital.<sup>64</sup> Depth was successfully achieved and this tactical action provides an example of deep operations executed at the operational level of war.

The NVA achieved another level of depth covertly by emplacing an extensive spy network into the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government. The intelligence gained by the Politburo during all three phases enhanced the NVA's ability to remain undetected from the ARVN leading up to the final invasion into South Vietnam. Moreover, on 28 April 1975, commandoes seized the Newport Bridge, effectively cutting off the capital from outside

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<sup>62</sup>Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South*, (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 89-111. The Tri Phap (12-19 Feb 1974), Suay (27 April-2 May 1974), and the Iron Triangle raids (16 May-7 June 1974) contributed to the exhaustion of ARVN units during the early spring-summer of 1974.

<sup>63</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 1059.

<sup>64</sup>Dougan and Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South*, 89-111.

assistance and the remaining land route from which Saigon could utilize to escape.<sup>65</sup>

Simultaneously, North Vietnamese infiltrators disguised as refugees, organized into squad-sized elements to seize key government buildings, police stations, and munitions dumps, complicating ARVN efforts to defend Saigon. This level of covert action added to the level of depth in which the NVA exploited in seizing Saigon.

The final question proposed is if the NVA's limited tactical actions assisted in meeting its strategic objectives. The answer to this question is yes due to the evidence presented in the case study. After the Paris Peace Accords and initial Politburo meetings in 1973, the North Vietnamese envisioned resuming hostilities, which involved tactical engagements intended to probe and test ARVN units' ability and will to defend key terrain. This produced the plan in Phase II to begin strategic raids on critical locations, driven by General Tra's initiative to gradually increase the size and intensity of attacks. These small engagements served to shape the strategic environment. Referred to as "fighting within the Paris Agreement," the NVA conducted limited attacks nested within strategic objectives, eventually setting conditions for the fall of Saigon and capitulation of the South Vietnamese government.<sup>66</sup>

In the spring of 1974, General Giap tested the ARVN defenses to measure the effectiveness of its defenses. Limited in scale, these attacks developed confidence in the NVA's capabilities during this significant period, thus supporting limited tactical actions shaping strategic objectives.<sup>67</sup> Limited attacks, in a sense, sustained the stress on the ARVN, setting conditions for the movement south in March-April of 1975. Part of the strategy during these

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<sup>65</sup>Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its War*, 273.

<sup>66</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 345.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 245-246.



limited attacks was to confuse and deceive ARVN leadership into complacency, limited in scope for the purpose of “surprise and diversion.”<sup>68</sup>

Tied to these limited attacks was the unnecessary usage of munitions and fuel, both crucial factors in South Vietnam’s ability to defend itself against northern aggression. The ARVN was limited to less than five hundred artillery rounds per day, fuel shortages to rotary winged aircraft and conservation on small arms ammunition. The limited attacks during Phase II, combined with the lack of U.S. land and air support, essentially sapped these resources and lead to the ARVN logistical structure to crumble from within. This key factor led to units expending ammo and fuel early in the NVA’s campaign south, allowing the NVA to exercise depth, simultaneity, and tempo unmolested into Saigon. As a caveat, the level of corruption within the ARVN was another factor hindering their ability to fight. ARVN units sold their ammunition for comfort items, undermining the ability of the ARVN leadership to control its valued resources.<sup>69</sup>

The final aspect of limited attacks linked to Giap’s strategy of employing Tra’s forces in a limited fashion in late 1974. These limited attacks met several objectives that enabled the posturing of armored forces forward. Giap intended to fix ARVN forces in their current positions and create attack positions for an eventual attack into the capital. Through this deliberate and methodical planning, Giap positioned his forces into a secure position to exploit success by providing space for consolidation efforts for the thrust into South Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> Once the Central Highlands were in NVA possession, only time dictated when Saigon fell to North Vietnam. Herrington states in *Peace with Honor* that the unorganized withdrawal of the ARVN and displaced civilians created condtions where South Vietnam had fought itself into a corner, sealing

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>69</sup>Hosmer, Kelley and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, 34.

<sup>70</sup>Veith, *Black April*, 543.

its fate.<sup>71</sup>

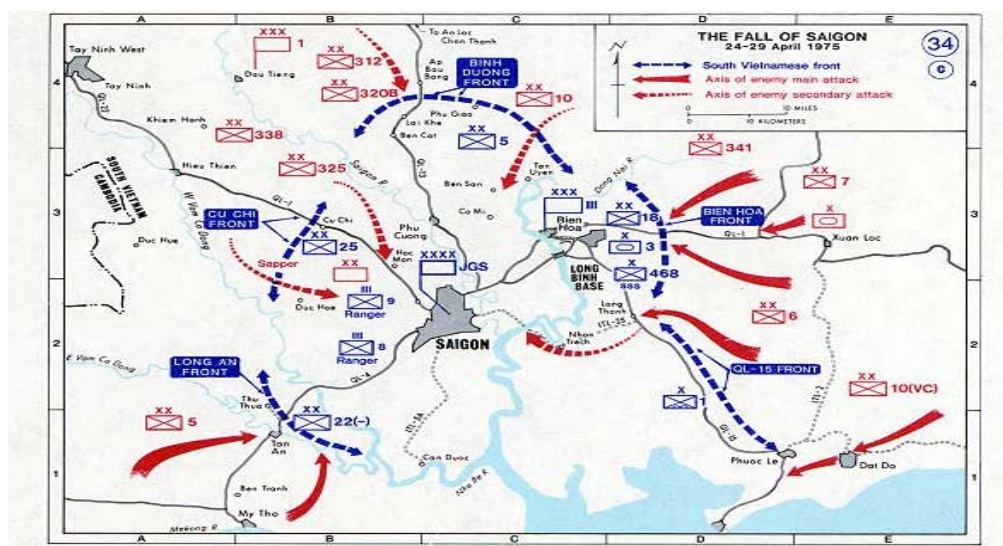


Figure 1: Disposition of NVA units seizing Saigon 24-29 April 1975<sup>72</sup>

### Summary

In summary, the NVA successfully employed depth, simultaneity, tempo, and limited attacks to achieve strategic success, negating the ARVN's ability to counter attack and delay attacks into the capital. The NVA leadership learned tough lessons during the 1968 and 1972 offensives, forcing the Politburo to reassess its ability to link strategic objectives with military means. The deliberate phasing, limited attacks and synchronization from political to military, enabled the NVA to transition seamlessly from small scale engagements and battles with ARVN forces, to large-scale coordinated armored maneuvers. Finally, the ARVN's lack of airpower, international support and proper training versus the NVA's massive armored formations were all factors that contributed to the NVA's success, resulting in the fall of Saigon.

<sup>71</sup>Herrington, *Peace with Honor? An American reports on Vietnam 1973-1975*, 155.

<sup>72</sup>Department of History, United States Military Academy, *The Vietnam War*, (West Point: New York, 1975), map 3.

### Findings and analysis

The purpose of this section is to conduct an analysis of the case study examined in section four. The first section includes a review of the findings from the case study. The second section will determine if the findings in the case study support the proposed hypothesis. The third section examines alternate explanations for the outcomes. The final section is a summary of the findings while also addressing the conclusion of what future studies may reveal through additional analysis.

#### Findings from the Case Study

Did the NVA employ tempo in their offensive? From 1974 to 1975, the NVA deliberately bombarded the ARVN in their defensive perimeter in a frequency and rhythm that created confusion and dictated the pace of attacks on their terms to match their operational goals. Synchronization of attacks by NVA forces during the strategic raids in late 1974 forced the ARVN to attempt to match force ratios outside of logical limits. The constant threat, unknown location and timings of these attacks crippled the ARVN, enabling the NVA to impose the duration of attacks and drive the ARVN to prematurely withdraw exhausted units from key defensive positions. Therefore, by establishing a chaotic and unpredictable battle rhythm through tactical actions, the ARVN's ability to counterattack severely hindered the ARVN's capacity to present forces at the proper position and time.

Did the NVA employ simultaneity in the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon? Simultaneity was efficiently utilized by the NVA by increasing the attacking number of units employed versus ARVN units defending. The NVA's frequency of attacks severely limited the ARVN's options of where to reinforce their defensive belt and rear areas. The NVA limited the ARVN's freedom of maneuver by attacking in the North and West with conventional forces and the South with guerilla forces simultaneously. These actions required the

fatal decision to commit the ARVN strategic reserve in Saigon. The premature commitment of the ARVN strategic reserve created opportunities for the NVA, permitting the armored corps in the north to travel south virtually unhindered, seizing the Central Highlands, thus creating conditions for the inevitable capture of Saigon.

Did the NVA use depth in attacking South Vietnam, thus eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA's flanks? The NVA achieved depth through the strategic raids in late 1974, combining guerrilla forces and covert agents in the south to provide valuable intelligence. The NVA assaulted ARVN units in their rear areas with guerilla units, eroding their ability to reinforce throughout the area of operations. Within the scope of the NVA's operational directives, they maintained combat elements in South Vietnam after the cease-fire in 1972. Subsequently, these elements harassed the ARVN in protected areas and persistently threatened the capital from 1973-1975, conducting shaping operations conducive for major combat operations in the north. The events in these two periods prevented the South Vietnamese government from understanding the true intent of the NVA and emergence of operational art. The NVA's seizure of key terrain in the Central Highlands created suitable conditions for future deep concentrated maneuvers into South Vietnam.

Did the NVA's limited tactical actions assist in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon? The original plan developed by the North Vietnamese Politburo to unify Vietnam by 1976 required an assessment of U.S. intervention. Generals Giap and Dung proposed the execution of limited raids in 1974 as a method to assess the endurance and responsiveness of the ARVN and intervention by the U.S. Once it was determined that U.S. airpower and resources were blocked off from the ARVN, these raids served to confirm that an offensive to seize Saigon was a strategic reality and possible through operational military means.

<b>CRITERIA</b>	<b>Ho Chi Minh Campaign</b>	<b>Why</b>
Did the NVA employ tempo in their offensive?	<b>Yes</b>	North Vietnamese forces used armored forces speed, combined with the artillery, infantry and engineers to maintain frequency dictated by their actions and enabled their forces to outpace South Vietnamese forces from 1974 to eventual surrender of Saigon.
Did the NVA employ simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon?	<b>Yes</b>	The NVA was able to employ simultaneity through their focus on synchronization of engineer, air and artillery assets to degrade ARVN defenses, secure key bridges and terrain and force ARVN units to fight in two different directions simultaneously
Did the NVA use depth in attacking South Vietnam, thus eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks?	<b>Yes</b>	The NVA was able to employ depth into their operations by traveling over sixty miles into enemy held territory unhindered, without maneuvering all of their forces into enemy engagement areas and maintained simultaneity and depth by constantly moving, creating a synergistic effect in the operational environment
Did the NVA's limited tactical actions assist in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon?	<b>Yes</b>	The NVA's brigade and division-sized attacks against ARVN units further enabled its ability to shape the strategic environment by testing the defenses of the ARVN and the political/diplomatic environment. This assisted in the NVA's ability to gauge whether the U.S. would commit resources and assets in the event of an attack on the capital. The NVA's limited attacks enabled its ability to create conditions for the eventual attack against its Strategic Center of Gravity.

Table 1: Summary of Findings from the Case Studies

### Hypothesis

The hypothesis states that the NVA deliberately used operational art, specifically tempo, depth, and simultaneity, in seizing Saigon in 1975. This study asserts that these tenets of operational art, linked to strategic objectives, are critical considerations for employment in conducting operational art. The data collected supports all questions proposed by the hypothesis earlier in this study. In table one, a summary of the findings from the case studies supports the empirical evidence presented by providing a concise explanation to support each inquiry. Evaluation of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign reflects the objectives gained by utilizing these tenets of operational art. This campaign highlights that the NVA leadership deliberately applied specific elements of operational art after the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973 to evaluate their force's capability to gain and maintain constant pressure on the ARVN's defensive belt. This forced the ARVN to address multiple threats in different directions simultaneously, outnumbered, and without the proper force structure in place to counter North Vietnamese conventional and unconventional forces.

<b>Criteria support to Hypothesis</b>		
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Ho Chi Minh Campaign</b>	<b>Supported/Unsupported</b>
Did the NVA employ tempo in their offensive?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Supported</b>
Did the NVA employ simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Supported</b>
Did the NVA use depth in attacking South Vietnam, thus eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Supported</b>
Did the NVA's limited tactical actions assist in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon?	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Supported</b>

Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Findings

### Alternate Explanations

This case study provides alternate explanations on the use of operational art by the NVA. First, U.S. airpower in 1968 and 1972 effectively destroyed the NVA's ability to mount large attacks. Once the United States withdrew assets and resources from South Vietnam, the Politburo used the artificial strategic narrative of rebuilding the northern economy in order to buy time for reconstitution and training of the NVA. The NVA viewed the capture of Saigon as vital to unifying Vietnam, and without the presence of U.S. strategic bombers and close air support made this initiative an operational reality.

Second, the ineptitude of the ARVN leadership in directing units in the operational environment created conditions for military failures. Plagued with corruption in the military and political establishment, the ARVN's view of the NVA's limited attacks in 1974 was status quo. This lack of true comprehension of North Vietnamese intentions enabled the NVA to attrite ARVN units slowly, eroding confidence and spawning a defeatist mentality within the ranks of the ARVN. The NVA preyed on the military ignorance within the ARVN leadership by emplacing covert agents within the political and military structures.<sup>73</sup> By emplacing these covert measures into the ARVN infrastructure, the NVA undermined the ability of the ARVN to counter reconnaissance efforts of South Vietnam's military and political attempts to control the population.

Third, the South Vietnamese government underestimated the level of contribution from the Soviet and Chinese regimes. Through the procurement of armored vehicles and training, the NVA outfitted their units with adequate resources required for a large offensive.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>73</sup>Weldon A. Brown, *The Last Chopper: The Denouement of the American Role in Vietnam, 1963-1975*, (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1976), 308.

<sup>74</sup>George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc, 2002), 22.

Soviet concept of deep operations heavily influenced the NVA in its attacks south.<sup>75</sup> Both of these aspects permitted the NVA to achieve operational success from 1973 to the eventual fall of Saigon in 1975. This allowed the ideology of communism to spread indirectly through assistance from regimes seeking to counter isolationist efforts from the U.S.

### Summary

The evidence from the case study suggests that the hypothesis under review demonstrates the use of operational art by the NVA, reiterating that the evidence presented supports the original proposed hypothesis. The NVA utilized simultaneity and tempo in concert, incorporating depth with limited attacks to achieve operational success. The evidence from the case study implies that the NVA deliberately utilized operational art in the capitulation of Saigon. Although not defined or explicitly directed, conceptually, the NVA applied the tenets of operational art in rhythm, time and space to eventually exhaust and disintegrate the ARVN's ability to protect its capital.

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<sup>75</sup>Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 223. Naveh explains that operational synergy created by combining specific elements of operational art simultaneously continues to reverberate throughout the operational environment. Soviet doctrine influenced the flow of tactical units within the Vietnam theater due to the constant flow of elements occurring within the area of operations uncontested. Soviet advisors advised their Communist counterparts in ways to leverage situations and take advantage of opportunities between the period of January 1974-March 1974. This period of significant weakness within the ARVN were the precise moments where operational art was utilized by the NVA.



## CONCLUSION

As explained earlier in this effort, the use of operational art tenets supported the NVA's seizure of Saigon and capitulation of the South Vietnamese government in April 1975. Given this analysis, understanding the operational environment and applying all means necessary in a conventional fight is essential for enduring success in the strategic environment. In the previous pages, this work strived to answer how tempo, depth, simultaneity and limited tactical actions can be employed with large conventional forces in restricted terrain with limited assets to conduct major combat operations. By broadening the definitions and intents of these terms, this study assessed their application during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Analysis discovered that incorporation of these tenets into this campaign sufficed in attaining the operational objective, thus allowing tactical means to achieve the strategic end state.

The thesis presented in section one is that the NVA used operational art, specifically tempo, depth and simultaneity, in seizing Saigon in April of 1975. The study sought to answer four questions through analysis and research from various sources and linked the concept of operational art to the events from 1973-1975. This study focused on four questions.

1. Did the NVA employ tempo in their offensive?
2. Did the NVA employ simultaneity into the penetration of the ARVN's defensive belt around Saigon?
3. Did the NVA use depth in attacking South Vietnam, thus eliminating the ARVN's ability to counter the NVA flanks?
4. Did the NVA's limited tactical actions assist in meeting its strategic objective, thus enabling the NVA to focus on the decisive point, the capital of Saigon?

The evidence available supports the thesis statement presented in this study. The evidence from the case study affirms that the NVA applied tempo, depth and simultaneity, combined with limited attacks, which shaped the strategic environment. The NVA outpaced and

created a chaotic and unpredictable situation in 1974 through limited raids. During this period, tempo and simultaneity was employed extensively against the defending ARVN. In addition, NVA units remained in South Vietnam after the ceasefire, thus creating difficulty in the ARVN rear areas. Although the seventeenth parallel established the limit of advance for the NVA and ARVN, this arbitrary demilitarized zone hindered the ARVN's ability to protect Saigon. This also instituted a false sense of security for forces in the defensive belt, unable to understand that NVA units were able to attack at critical points and seize key terrain without impunity.

The purpose of this study was to explore the deliberate use of operational art by the NVA in the Ho Chi Minh campaign. This study is important to operational planners because this campaign exhibits how to arrange tactical actions (means) with operational objectives (ways) to achieve strategic end states (ends). Study of the Vietnam War normally devolves into a discourse of counter insurgency. The period analyzed in this study benefits the need for a true understanding of applying operational art at all levels of war, utilizing conventional and unconventional forces to achieve strategic objectives.

The Ho Chi Minh campaign is applicable for study in professional military education and academia as an example of how to plan operationally in a strategic environment. This campaign exemplifies the methodology required to conduct tactical actions to match the strategic goals set by political leaders. Furthermore, the Soviet concept of deep operations, as found in current U.S. doctrine, is consistently displayed in this campaign as a way to achieve unparalleled success under severe political and military constraints.<sup>76</sup> The benefits for strategic leaders, operational planners and tacticians to study this campaign gain valued learning, shifting the focus of where and when to apply military force within the operational environment. The lessons learned and

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<sup>76</sup>George Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2010), 327.

insights gained by analyzing this campaign are immeasurable in attempting to replicate how to arrange tactical actions with operational goals.

The primary focus of this work was to analyze the NVA's use of operational art in the Ho Chi Minh campaign. More specifically, how depth, simultaneity, and tempo assisted in shaping the strategic environment during the Ho Chi Minh campaign. There were several factors that were not covered in this focused analysis: first, the involvement of the Soviet Union's advisors on the initial planning in 1972 for the offensive in 1975; second, the procurement of newly acquired armored capabilities from the Soviet Union and China; third, the shift from infantry centric guerilla warfare to conventional warfare. Influenced by these three factors, the 1968 and 1972 offensives yielded similar dismal results. If possible, further research on these initiatives might offer an insight into why the Politburo shifted its priorities to a mixture of conventional and unconventional forces in the southern military regions to seize Saigon.

The NVA was successful in draining resources and force capabilities from the ARVN and set conditions for the capitulation of the South Vietnamese government. The North Vietnamese political and military leaders foresaw an opportunity to seize the initiative and risk applying combat power in locations previously uncontested. The Soviet concept of deep operations greatly enhanced the NVA's ability to maneuver, and when presented the opportunity, successfully demoralized the ARVN's ability to defend itself without U.S. assistance.

By increasing the number of armored corps attacking simultaneously, in depth and at a frequency determined by the NVA, the NVA forced the ARVN to commit its strategic reserves at inopportune locations. This created a force ratio of four to one, and five to one in some instances, where the ARVN lost its ability to counter armored penetrations and envelopments. The ARVN did not possess the means to create a buffer for Saigon to contain and defeat future planned attacks. Additionally, the NVA exploited these opportunities by attacking in sequence at intervals where the ARVN were outpaced in creating conditions for timely decisions. The NVA,

utilizing tempo, created opportunities that led to the successful staging of the equivalent of three armies and three divisions on the doorstep of Saigon in March of 1975. The inability of the ARVN to make timely decisions, based on the strength and dispositions of NVA armored units, resulted in a lack of operational understanding. The seizing of key terrain and encirclement of units vital to the defense belt securing Saigon ensured NVA success at the operational level, linking tactical actions and strategy.

The NVA's operational plans were meticulously planned and flawlessly executed, while the ARVN's feeble attempts at countering an NVA attack created chaos for the ensuing civilian and military withdrawal back to Saigon. Simply put, the failures of the ARVN resided in the lack of U.S. airpower, resource support, and incomplete operational and strategic end states. The porous borders of Cambodia and Laos pressured the ARVN to defend everything, while defending nothing. The alteration of the border, sacrificing space to create opportunities, would have ensured consolidation of the ARVN, creating an attainable goal of defending the border while adding reserves to the defending units responsible for defending Saigon.

Several factors contributed to the NVA's operational successes. First, their ability to use allotted time to build, test and employ methods and formations without interference. Second, the ARVN reliance solely on airpower hindered their ability to engage the NVA consistently throughout the campaign. Strategically, the North Vietnamese Politburo bought time to re-organize efforts at the operational levels through false narratives and dialogues. Operationally, the NVA was better suited and truly believed in their cause to unify Vietnam through military means. On the other hand, the ARVN did not possess such views, and in fact, units traded sides when provided the opportunity. After the September 1970 cease-fire agreement, NVA troops and guerilla forces were allowed to remain in place, increasing problems for the South Vietnamese

government and ARVN significantly.<sup>77</sup> The mentality instilled into the NVA from years of bombardment by U.S. forces ultimately paid dividends in their strive for complete domination of the Vietnam theater. The 1968, 1972 offensives and Cambodian incursions built resiliency within their formations, emerging during the March 1975 advance to seize Saigon. The confidence exuded from the NVA leadership and confidence from the Politburo accorded the NVA the public support required for an extended and arduous campaign. South Vietnam, corrupted through years of American funding and unwavering support, relied on an old policy and narrative. When confronted with the realities of having to fend for themselves, they crumbled under the false facade of a puppet government, meeting its demise in April of 1975.

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<sup>77</sup>Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Fight the Last Battle*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 172.

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